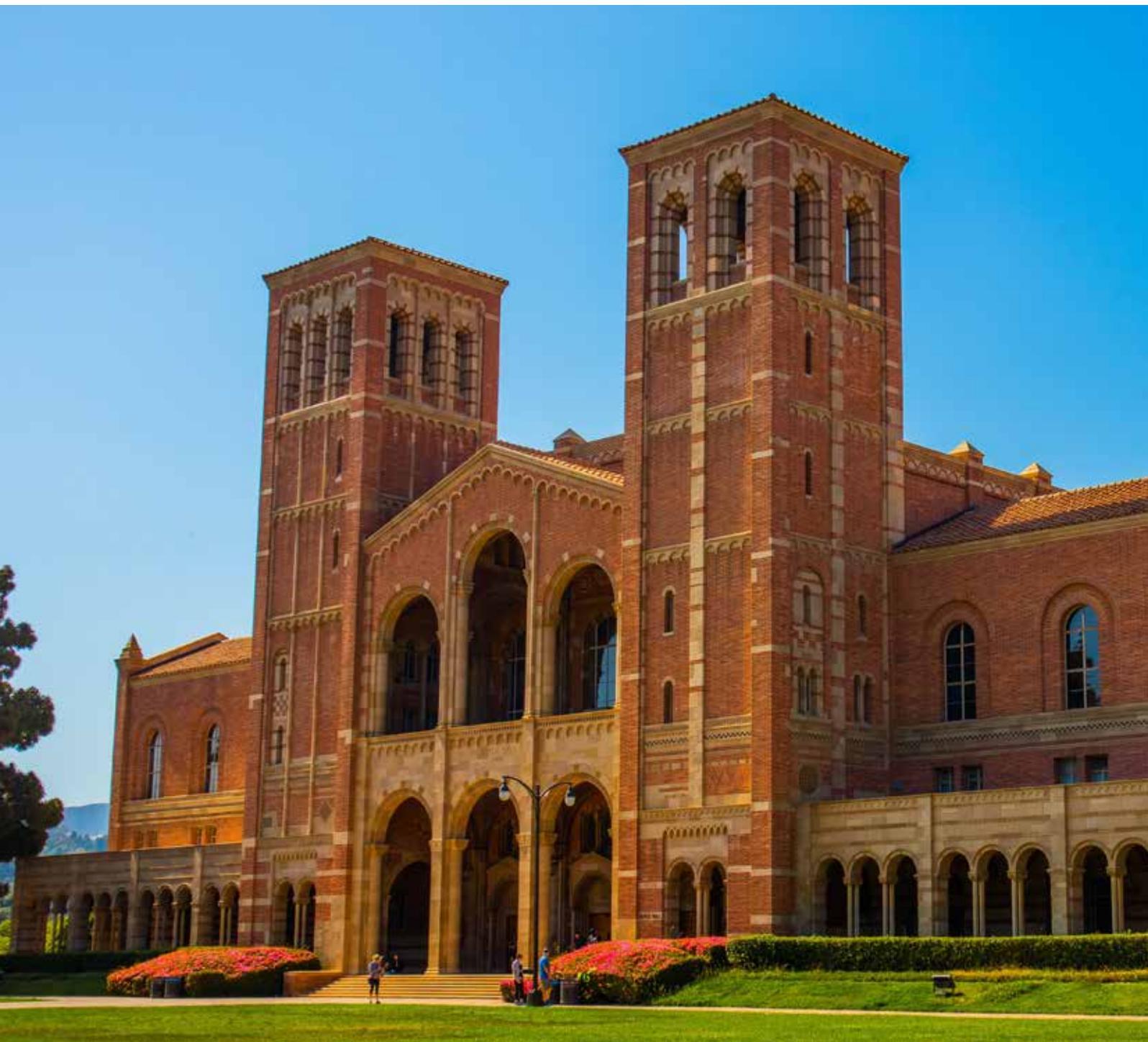


BridgeÜ

Studying at University in the USA



Why study at a US university?

- High-ranking globally
- International cohorts
- Flexibility to change degree focus
- World-leading research departments
- Sports and extra-curricular opportunities
- High tuition fees but also funding options available

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Application overview

Early application deadlines

November

Every university and college has its own application deadlines, but they fall around the same time. Early applicants (early action, early decision or single choice early action) generally need to get their applications in by either November 1 or November 15.

Early application notifications

Mid December

The most common notification is in mid-December, so you should find out whether you were accepted, denied or deferred before you go on holiday. Deferred means that they push you into the regular decision application pool and they will re-consider you at that point.

Regular application deadlines

January – February

This depends on the college, but the deadline for regular decision applications is normally between January 1 and February 1. This deadline means that your first semester grades will be looked at, so consider that as part of your application!

Regular application notifications

March – April

Applicants will usually be notified between the end of March and the beginning of April.

Student decisions

May

If you apply under regular decision or with early action, most colleges will give you until May 1 to let them know if you're attending.

Setting the scene

Considering the USA as a destination for your studies is exciting, and with over 4,000 colleges and universities in the USA to choose from, you have an enormous amount of choice to tailor it to your academic, social and geographical preferences. The US application system has many and various complex requirements – but don't be disheartened! This guide will help you navigate the different requirements, and help get you started with picking the right options for you.

A few things for you to bear in mind while you read this guide:

1. Universities in the US vary in population sizes; this can mean 40,000 students in the university, and class sizes of over 300. Just think about that for a second and consider if it's something that appeals (and reflect your preference on the **Profile Builder** to filter your options).
2. Rankings of US universities can vary a lot depending on the subject or discipline you're talking about. They also don't necessarily correlate to international 'brand' rankings. There are lesser-known hidden gems that have fantastic teaching, resources and student experience, which your teachers or parents may never have heard of!
3. US universities have lots of requirements, including testing, university-specific essays, recommendations and evidence of financial capacity to pay for college.
4. US universities vary dramatically – they have different characters, academic focus areas, facilities, reputations and learning styles. With over 4,000 options, you can find the perfect fit for you.
5. The USA as a country is varied: culturally, geographically and in terms of how accessible different parts are for travel and access to international communities.

The US admissions process

It's easy to underestimate how time consuming and complicated the US admissions process is. You will need time to research Universities and programs to find the best fit for you. Once you've done that, you'll need to look at the deadlines and requirements. Universities will consider your application in terms of your academic record alongside other key factors, which we will cover in this guide.

Your academic record

Your academic record means, in most cases, your GPA or 'Grade Point Average'. This is the grading system used by the majority of US high schools. Don't worry if your school doesn't use it: you can convert your grades into GPA using online converter tools.

You will need to find out from your college counselor if they have a conversion they already use for your school because it may be 'weighted' depending on your school. If you are studying the IB, many US universities now list IB average grades alongside GPA.

English language requirements

You must evidence your English language proficiency to attend your studies by undertaking a worldwide recognised English Language test, whether that's TOEFL or IELTS. If you've had English as your medium of instruction at high school, you can apply for a waiver, which would mean you don't need to take this test – check with your counselor or relevant careers adviser if you're unsure (e.g.: If you recently transferred to an English-speaking international school). It's a good thing to check the individual university/colleges' websites of your interest to bear them in mind.

Standardised testing

These are the two recognised standardised tests that many US universities require: the SAT or the ACT. These tests assess similar skills with some variation in their focus and approach. Use the table below to see which one might fit your strengths best:

SAT	Criteria	ACT
Reading (65 mins) Writing & Language (35 mins) Mathematics 1 (25 mins no calculator) Mathematics 2 (55 mins with calculator)	Test sections	English (45 mins) Mathematics (60 mins) Reading (35 mins) Science (35 mins) Writing (40 mins – optional)
3 hours (180 minutes)	Length	2 hours 55 mins (or 3 hours 35 mins with Writing)
Reading; relevant words in context; numeracy (maths); grammar; writing	Skills tested	Grammar & usage; numeracy (maths); science reasoning; writing
Questions are in context and can be complex	Test method	Questions can be long, but are typically less complex to understand than the SAT
Two sections (math & evidence-based reading and writing) each scored out of 800 to arrive at a composite score out of 1600.	Scoring	Four sections are scored from 1-36. The final ACT score is the average of the 4 sections.
Arithmetic, problem-solving & data analysis, algebra, geometry, pre-calculus, trigonometry (formulas provided).	Math focus	Arithmetic, algebra, functions, geometry, trigonometry (no formulas provided).
Not allowed in one section of the test.	Calculator policy	Allowed to use on all portions of the test.
Mathematics questions increase in difficulty as you progress through a section. Reading questions are chronological, rather than ordered by difficulty. Writing & Language questions are random and not ordered by difficulty.	Difficulty	Mathematics and Science sections increase in difficulty as you progress through the test. English & Reading questions are random and not ordered by difficulty.
None – you only get scores for correct answers (not deductions for incorrect ones)	Guessing penalty	None – you only get scores for correct answers (not deductions for incorrect ones)
March/April; May; June; August; October; November; December	Offered	February; April; June; July; September; October; December

Admissions criteria

The 'whole student': How your application will be reviewed

While academic requirements are an important aspect of US applications, they are not the only consideration. Universities will have their own criteria for prioritizing attributes and traits of applications which go beyond GPA and SAT.

Often (but not always), US applications are reviewed by a committee. This means that the entirety of the application is considered: stretching beyond the academic achievements but focusing on the applicant too. They will typically score students for both academic achievement and personal qualities or activities. They will take into account recommendations from the guidance counselor and the applicant's background and life experiences that mean the person brings diversity to the student body. It's worth researching what the university values and what they're looking to improve in their student body (e.g.: better gender ratios/students from different socio-economic backgrounds/students from different cultural backgrounds/students with performance experience in music or theatre) to see if you could have a better chance applying to certain colleges. Based on the committee's consideration, a student's application will be flagged in the admissions portal as accepted, holding for review, or denied.

Note:

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of admission officers who highly value the quality of 'resilience', or the ability to deal with difficult times and come out the other end stronger having learned from these experiences... reflect on your past experiences and what transversal skills you can demonstrate.

Criteria admissions officers will look for:



Your background & personality



Your passions & drive



Extra curricular interests



Awards & accolades



Academic achievements

Information they review:

Academics

- Your test results (including subject tests and language tests as applicable)
- Your high school grades or predicted grades.

What you say

- Your essay(s) and how you put yourself across/what you highlight about who you are.
- Your extra-curriculars and other accolades (e.g.: concert pianist; competed nationally in athletics).

What others say

- Your guidance counselor's comments about you as a person and as a learner.
- Your teacher's remarks about you as a member of the school and in terms of academic excellence.

How to stand out from the crowd:

1. Get niche (if you can!)

An interest in something that few people can demonstrate, or have been successful at, may turn heads. For example, if you've learned to yodel, or you're working towards sailing around the world, or you've developed a successful phone app – make sure the admissions team know about it!

2. Go deep if you can't go niche!

If you love something popular, you can still stand out! It's never too late to involve yourself in a passion, hobby or extra-curricular. If you've shown dedication and proactivity with something across a long period of time, you may get their attention.

3. Get personal

Think of your application as a way to connect with admissions officers and convince them that you're the right person for their institution. This means being someone they can get excited about.

4. Open up

Talking about challenges you've faced and how you may have overcome them will be more compelling than expressing your passion for basketball (in most cases!)

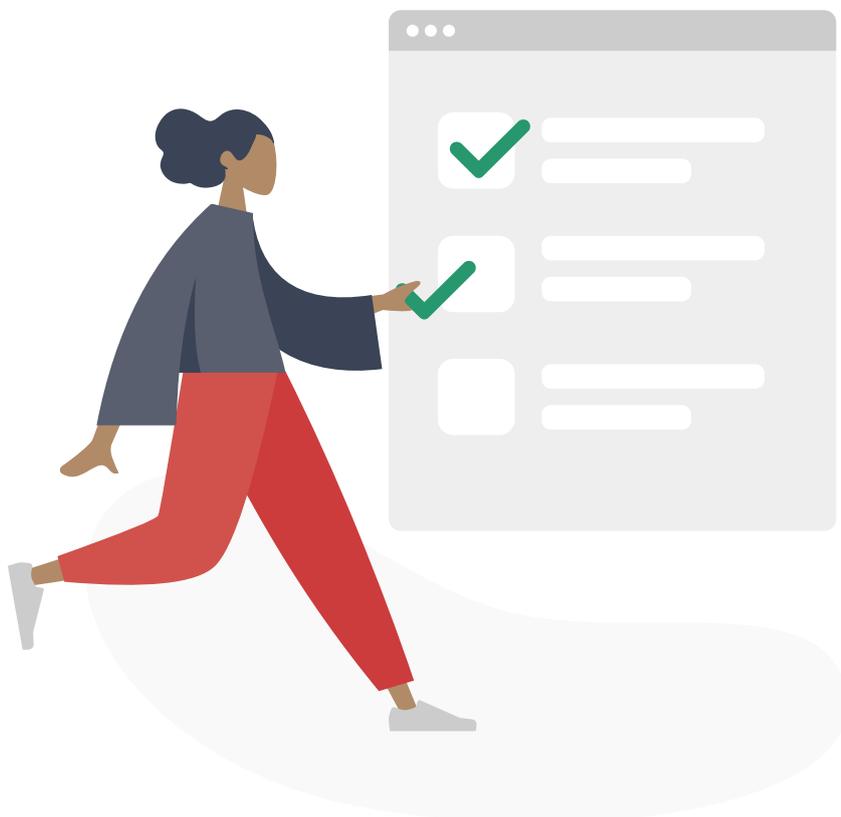
5. Connect the dots

Make sure the admissions person who reads your application is left in no doubt about your ability to thrive and succeed at college. This means demonstrating your aptitude to the challenges of college life – being resilient, a self-starter, open and positive. Tailoring this to the college is critical, so do your research!

Chance of acceptance

There are a number of factors that can affect your chance of acceptance to a US university. Let's examine these in more detail.

- Average SAT and GPA (or equivalent) that the university typically accepts.
- Competition quality – how your grades rank compared to other applicants.
- Competition volume – the number of people applying for limited spots.
- Academic preferences – for example: some universities weight SAT/ACT as more important than others; some are more comfortable with IB and other international qualifications than others.
- Your high school's reputation – previous applicants from your school can have a direct impact on your chances.
- Beyond academics – your background, your essay, your participation in extracurricular activities can all influence your application. This depends on the university and what they are looking for.



Early Decision & Early Action

What is Early Decision (ED)?

Early Decision is a way for you to indicate a commitment to a college and receive an early response from them. If you are accepted, your application is 'binding', meaning that you are legally obliged to attend (unless you don't have enough financial aid to afford the tuition). This means you can only apply to one college Early Decision. When your college responds (typically December–February), it will either be acceptance, rejection or deferral.

Deferral means that your application is no longer binding, so even if you're accepted into it during the regular decision process, you are no longer legally obliged to attend this college. You can now apply to other schools and decide among all the colleges that accept you. Unlike deferral, a rejection means that your application has been rejected entirely, not just for early decision. This also unfortunately means that you cannot re-apply during regular admissions.

What is Early Action (EA)?

Early Action is an application ahead of the usual application deadline. However, unlike Early Decision, there is no binding commitment if you are accepted. You may apply Early Action to more than one college, except in the case of colleges that offer "Single-Choice Early Action." You will receive an early response (usually late December to February), but do not have to commit to the college until the normal reply date of May 1, so you can consider all your options. An alternative option is 'Restrictive Early Action'. In this case you can only apply to one institution. However, acceptance decisions are non-binding, meaning that if the student has been accepted, they could still decide to reject the offer and go somewhere else.

What does ED/EA I and ED/EA II mean?

Some universities divide their Early Decision and Early Action pools into two groups (called I and II). The first group (ED/EA I) typically has deadlines in November to mid-December, whereas the second group (ED/EA II) deadlines are usually closer to Regular Application deadlines (late December to early January).

The benefits of applying early

Applying early shows the college your enthusiasm for studying at their institution, which can increase the chance of gaining acceptance. In fact, statistics consistently show that early decision and early action applicants generally have a greater chance of acceptance.

The downsides of applying early

Applying early commits you to one university and **means that you can't compare your options** and then make a decision. If scholarships/financial aid are important to you, you won't be able to look at all your options and choose the best.

Below we've outlined the benefits of applying via Early Decision/Early Action vs Regular Decision. Have a look at see which option is right for you!

Best Fit for EA or ED:

- You have a specific first-choice institution.
- It is feasible to have your application documents ready early.
- Your priority is attending a top ranked institution.
- You don't expect to improve your transcript/predicted grades substantially with more work.

Best Fit for Regular Decision

- Your priority is financial aid, so you want to compare scholarships in each of your offers.
- You don't know for certain your first choice university.
- You need more time to prepare your application.
- You want to improve your transcript/predicted grades.

Stats:

Colorado College's regular decision acceptance rate was just 6% for the Class of 2020 – much lower than the acceptance rates for its two early rounds: 31% and 17%.

Third party interview services

Third-party video interview services now play a prominent role in US admissions in recent years and are seen as a way to better ensure the integrity of the admissions file and also to provide for a more complete assessment of the applicant.

How does it work?

Third party interview providers check the credentials of the applicant. They conduct interviews in English and then share a recording of the conversation with the universities selected by the student. The intent is that the video will give admissions officers a fuller sense of the applicant's personality as well as their English language skills.

InitialView and Vericant are two companies that offer video interview services. Both are headquartered in Beijing, but they conduct interviews – either in person or online – with students all over the world. The interviews can range from 10 to 20 minutes. As part of these companies' interview packages, students also write a short, timed essay in English.

InitialView and Vericant partner with particular US universities (check their websites to see a list). Note that many universities (for example: Bard College) work with both companies, which will mean you can choose the right interview service for you. In some cases, they only accept one service – so it's worth doing your research. InitialView and Vericant take slightly different approaches, the key differences of which are summarised below:

Vericant	InitialView
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scores interviews using their own criteria (graded on a scale of 1-6) • \$245 for a basic interview. • Structured interview (intro, picture description and discussion, in-depth questions, academic interest questions). • Ability to re-take up to 3 times. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No scoring of interviews. • \$199 for a college interview. • Interviews are unscripted and typically conducted by people with admissions experience. • Ability to re-take interview.

Note:

It is recommended to visit their official website to get the most up-to-date information.

Top interview tips for applicants:

1. Schedule as soon as you can! Sometimes there is high demand and you can't get your preferred slot if you leave it too late. If you can't share your video in time for your college deadline, that will significantly disadvantage your application.
2. Prepare by watching examples of videos available on the websites. Write down what you want to say about yourself and the key points you want the colleges to know about you.
3. Relax and don't recite a script! It will be off-putting and won't put you in your best light.
4. Get help from someone you trust practicing how you might answer different types of questions (examples are available on the web sites of both services).
5. Ask if other colleges will accept a video interview – some who don't state that they do may agree, so it's always worth asking!



Documentation

For your application, you will need to submit a multitude of documents. Some universities will want more things (or different things) than others. Be prepared to write tailored essays for each university you apply to. Here is a quick overview of what you and your school will need to prepare.

Academics: Your record

School profile

This is a document that your school will prepare and send for every applicant. It explains to the university what your high school is like, what their academic program is and ensures the university trusts the rigor and quality of the education you have received.

Transcript

This is your academic achievement — grades you have achieved in your high school years, as well as (in some cases) predicted grades for exams you plan to take, such as the IB, AP or A Levels. It will need to be in English.

Mid-year report

This shows ongoing progress after you have applied, so don't take your foot off the pedal!

Test scores

This will include SAT/ACT, TOEFL, AP scores and anything else you need to demonstrate in order to be eligible to apply.

Final transcript/End of year report

This shows consistent momentum and performance in your studies.

About you:

Teacher and counselor recommendations

Universities will have different requirements (and allowances) for teacher and counselor recommendation letters. Some will ask for two but allow three, some will require three, others just one! The letter talks about your personality, your capability as a learner and what you will bring to the student body of the university.

Essay (standard)

The Common App essay and Coalition essay prompts will provide a 'standard' essay or series of essays that are shared with all colleges you apply to through those portals.

Essay/s (supplemental or specific)

This allows you to tell a university why you want to study with them (or why you want to study a specific subject if you're applying to a particular college/school that specializes). Some universities require more than one supplemental essay.

Extras:

Most universities will also want to see:

- A copy of your passport.
- Evidence of your visa eligibility.
- Bank statements showing sufficient funds for one year of study.



Which university is right for me?

Spend some time reflecting and then make notes on each of the below areas. You can return to review them later once you've learned more about different US universities and how they fit your priorities:

What has been most important and rewarding to me at secondary/high school?
What hasn't?

What is my learning style? Do I prefer lecture-based learning or small group discussions?

Do I like being one of the top of the class? Or do I enjoy lots of clever peers to challenge me?

What extra-curricular activities are important to me? What do I want to continue in college?

What do I know about my academic interests and abilities that may influence what I study in college?



Don't forget to fill out the **Profile Builder** in BridgeU. This will allow you to state a preference about various different aspects (learning style, size, location etc) and find colleges that might fit you holistically. After you've read this guide, we recommend doing your profile again to see if anything has changed.

University regions



The North East

This region is characterised by older, traditional prestigious universities. Universities in this region have a long tradition of being popular with international students, partly because of the stellar research universities, particularly in Massachusetts.

States included

Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, Vermont.

The vibe

Busy, ambitious, slightly more conservative than the West.

Climate, environment and food

The north east has four seasons with beautiful campuses and great architecture to set off the fall leaves and snow. It boasts international cuisine with some local favourites (think: cheese steak, clam chowder and buffalo wings).



The West

When most people think of the west, they think California. This is a huge university destination, but the west also includes states such as Oregon, Washington and Colorado. Typically the universities in the west are newer, and are known for their beautiful settings. Despite being located on the other side of the country, the Pacific states are educationally on par with the Northeast.

States included

Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, Wyoming.

The vibe

Liberal, laid-back, tech-focused, innovative, outdoorsy.

Climate, environment and food

In California and Colorado, there is sunshine all year round, and the West in general is characterised by diverse natural beauty (think mountains, sea, great plains). In Montana and Wyoming, it's colder but you get the drama of vast landscapes. Food is Asian and Mexican influenced, with plenty of healthy, vegetarian-friendly options.



The South

The south is characterised by older universities with a lot of history and traditions as well as beautiful campuses. The south boasts schools such as Georgetown, Davidson, Duke and universities such as the University of Virginia and the University of North Carolina.

States included

Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Washington DC, West Virginia.

The vibe

Preppy, sporty, friendly, laid-back, conservative.

Climate, environment and food

Some call it 'swampy'! It's hot and humid for most of the year. Lots of access to nature (depending on the state this may include sea, mountains or farmland). Traditional foods from the south are hearty and flavorful – lots of barbeque, hot sauce and fried chicken!



The Mid-West

The Mid-West covers a wide diversity of mini university cultures, but generally plays host to well-rounded universities catering to a wide variety of students. If you imagine a huge US university from Hollywood films, it's probably most similar to universities in the Mid-West. Top schools in this region are largely comprised by liberal arts schools. The University of Michigan being the top ranked public school in the region with other large state schools such as Ohio State, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Campaign, and Indiana University-Bloomington.

States included

Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, Wisconsin.

The vibe

Sporty, conservative, friendly.

Climate, environment and food

Here you'll find extremes of the US climate. The northern parts of the mid-west (Minnesota, Michigan and Wisconsin) are some of the coldest states, while Missouri and Kansas are typically warmer. The food is classic 'Americana': hearty, plainer flavours, less influenced by international palates compared to other regions.

Public vs. private universities

What is a 'public' university?

'Public' means that the university is receiving funding from the (normally state) government, and their tuition fees will be lower than private universities. Public universities are typically larger and give lower fees to in-state students (international students will be considered 'out of state' students). Because of the financial incentive for in-state students to attend these universities, this can mean that they have a bit less diversity (compared to private universities) in terms of where students are from geographically.

Public universities are generally bigger than private universities (although there are some very large private universities in the states!). Their large size generally correlates two other characteristics: they tend to offer a wider variety of majors, and they may have less staff time for individual attention to students. Many public universities are in top places in world rankings.

Examples include:

- University of Michigan
- Georgia Institute of Technology
- University of Texas at Austin

What is a 'private' university?

Private universities don't receive state funding, and therefore typically have higher tuition fees. They tend to be smaller and more diverse in their student populations, with more contact time between faculty members and individual student. Because of their size, most private universities offer a smaller variety of majors but there are exceptions to this.

Private universities equally perform in ranking tables and in many cases, outperform them. The student demographic is also more varied whereas in public universities the majority are in-state students. Some private universities are very large, and many have alumni funding to help students with the relatively high tuition fees, so it doesn't necessarily mean that a private university will be smaller or more expensive.

Examples include:

- Harvard University
- University of Chicago
- New York University (NYU)

Liberal Arts Colleges vs. Universities

– In a nutshell

Liberal Arts Colleges

Liberal arts colleges are generally defined by offering a broad education in lots of different subjects (ranging from arts to humanities to sciences), and by being smaller environments where students receive more individual attention.

Examples:

- Amherst College
- Pomona College
- Colgate University

Liberal arts colleges are usually an independent institution, although sometimes it is a college within or affiliated with a larger university. These colleges predominantly focus on undergraduate education. Classes are generally taught by professors who see teaching as their primary responsibility. Because most liberal arts colleges are smaller than universities, classes tend to be smaller and more personal attention is available.

As opposed to preparation for a specific career path, students who attend liberal arts colleges are exposed to a broad base of courses in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences. In addition, they select at least one area of in-depth study which will be their college major. Many employers look for graduates of liberal arts programs and value their well-rounded preparation.

Notable arts graduates:

- Madeleine Albright (Former Secretary of State) – Wellesley
- Stephen Sondheim (Composer) – Williams
- Susan Wojcicki (Youtube CEO) – Harvard

Universities

Universities in the US tend to be larger (they can be either private or public funded) and have a reputation through the media for having a huge student population with a focus on sports and social societies. While college sport is indeed a focus at many universities, and can be an important stepping-stone to a career in professional sport for a variety of athletes, it's not all about sports and parties! Top ranked universities in the US are widely considered to offer the best higher education in the world.

Examples:

- Harvard University
- University of California, Berkeley
- Duke University

Universities are generally larger than liberal arts colleges. Most universities include a college of arts and sciences where students can pursue liberal arts studies. They also include professionally oriented colleges under the umbrella of the university. Universities offer a greater range of academic choices than liberal arts colleges. They will likely provide more extensive resources in terms of library, laboratory, fine arts and athletic facilities. At many large universities, class size will reflect institutional size and most introductory classes are taught in a lecture format.

Notable university graduates:

- Barack Obama – Harvard University
- Milton Friedman (economist) – U Chicago
- Buzz Aldrin (astronaut) – MIT
- Larry Page (co-founder of Google) – U Michigan

Other University types

Technical Institutes and Professional Schools

Examples:

- MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology)
- SCAD (Savannah College of Art and Design)

These colleges emphasize on preparation for specific careers. Examples include engineering, technical sciences, fine art, film and music. If you're certain about what you want to do, these could be a really good option to help you develop the skills to transfer into your goal profession.

Community or junior colleges (an alternative to the traditional 4-year degree)

These generally offer the first two years of a liberal arts education, in addition to specialized occupational preparation. An associate degree is awarded at the end of a two-year program of studies, following which many students continue their education at a four-year institution. Students can also earn certificates for specific careers in under two years.

Women's Colleges

With their larger numbers of female faculty and administrators, these colleges offer women confidence building role models, greater opportunities to serve in a full range of student leadership positions, and a heightened awareness of career possibilities for women.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

The origins for these colleges and universities are in the time when African-American students were denied access to most other colleges and universities. Students at HBCUs have a unique opportunity to experience an educational community in which they are a part of the majority. They find committed faculty mentors who encourage their expectations of success. This doesn't mean you can't apply if you have a different ethnic background. Some HBCUs, such as Tennessee State University, have become popular with people from all over the world due to their strong academics and diverse student bodies.

Hispanic-serving institutions

These are colleges, universities or systems/districts where total Hispanic enrollment constitutes a minimum of 25 percent.

Different types of degree

US degrees differ dramatically, but they also have a lot in common. The US education system is known for its flexibility in allowing students to build their own degree even within a relatively narrow area of focus. By enabling students to take credits which come from a patchwork of different courses, students can discover their strengths and eventually ‘choose a major’ and begin concentrating on an area that inspires them. Before we look at the different types of degrees available, let’s just quickly cover some terminology that we’ll be using.

Glossary:

Majors and minors:

Students take ‘credits’ as part of their undergraduate experience. Their ‘major’ is the subject which takes a large portion of those credits. Typically, students complete 10 out of the required 20 credits in the major subject area. A minor is a lesser area of concentration which takes a smaller proportion of credits. Some students choose their minor to be a complementary subject (e.g.: major in English literature, minor in Film studies), while others favour diversity (e.g.: major in Chemistry, minor in History). Some students may choose not to major in one thing and minor in another, but rather do what is called a ‘double major’ (sometimes called dual major). This happens when a student completes two sets of degree requirements. Although they declare two separate majors, most schools only award one bachelor’s degree listing both majors at time of completion.

Track:

A “track” usually means there are several relatively independent paths of study within a single program (or ‘major’). Generally speaking, a track will be used more when there is a specific end-goal, such as a particular profession or field of research. These usually have suggested courses to take in a certain order. If you’re planning to go into research/postgraduate study, you may take a different track, within the same field, compared with someone who wants to go directly into a profession.

Pre-professional degrees

Pre-professional degrees are aimed at students who intend to enter into post graduate training for a specific career.

- Pre-health/pre-medical (often called 'pre-med') for those interested in the health professions (e.g.: dentistry, medicine, veterinary medicine etc).
- Pre-law for students who want to become lawyers.

Generally rather than being majors, these are recognized areas of academic interest. At most colleges and universities, students do not have the option of a pre-professional academic major or minor. They are considered instead to be on a 'track' with an explicit academic interest. They can therefore choose any undergraduate major in any field, so long as certain required courses are completed. The required courses will be related to their pre-professional interest, so for example: in the case of 'pre-med' students, these are likely to be in the fields of biology, chemistry and physics which will be necessary to prepare for the MCAT (Medical College Admissions Test).

Majors and minors at liberal arts colleges

Earlier in this guide we have looked at liberal arts colleges and compared them to universities in terms of student life. We're now going to look at why you might choose a liberal arts degree. Liberal arts colleges offer one expansive area of study, rather than degree 'tracks'. For a student who wants to gain a technical skill like engineering, at a liberal arts college they will learn broadly and can major in related subjects (e.g.: sciences or mathematics) and still end up in an engineering career. Liberal Arts colleges don't focus on one subject, but offer broader areas of study, sometimes incorporating aspects students don't gain from more focused classes.

Majors and minors at universities

Academically, university degrees are more flexible and allow students to focus on specific areas of study. For example, a student interested in engineering can major in engineering through bachelor of science program or do a dual degree in engineering through the bachelor of science and bachelor of arts programs. The dual degree program would involve the study of engineering through the School of Engineering & Applied Sciences and the School of Arts & Sciences, which would include different course focuses, enabling them to cover more specific topics related to a major.

FAQs about US degrees

1. Do you have to apply to a specific major or minor?

In brief, no unless the course requires you to commit from the start. Some students do apply with a particular subject 'declared' in their application. But you don't have to – you can use the first year or so at university to decide based on a range of experiences.

2. Can I change my mind about my major?

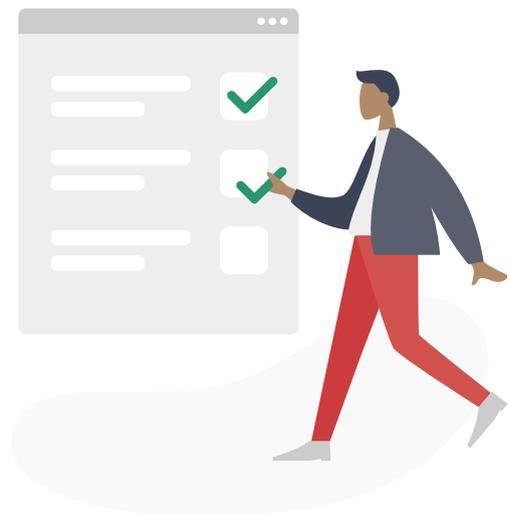
Yes. It's very common for students at US universities to switch their major after one or two years at university – don't worry!

3. Do my major and minor subjects have to be connected?

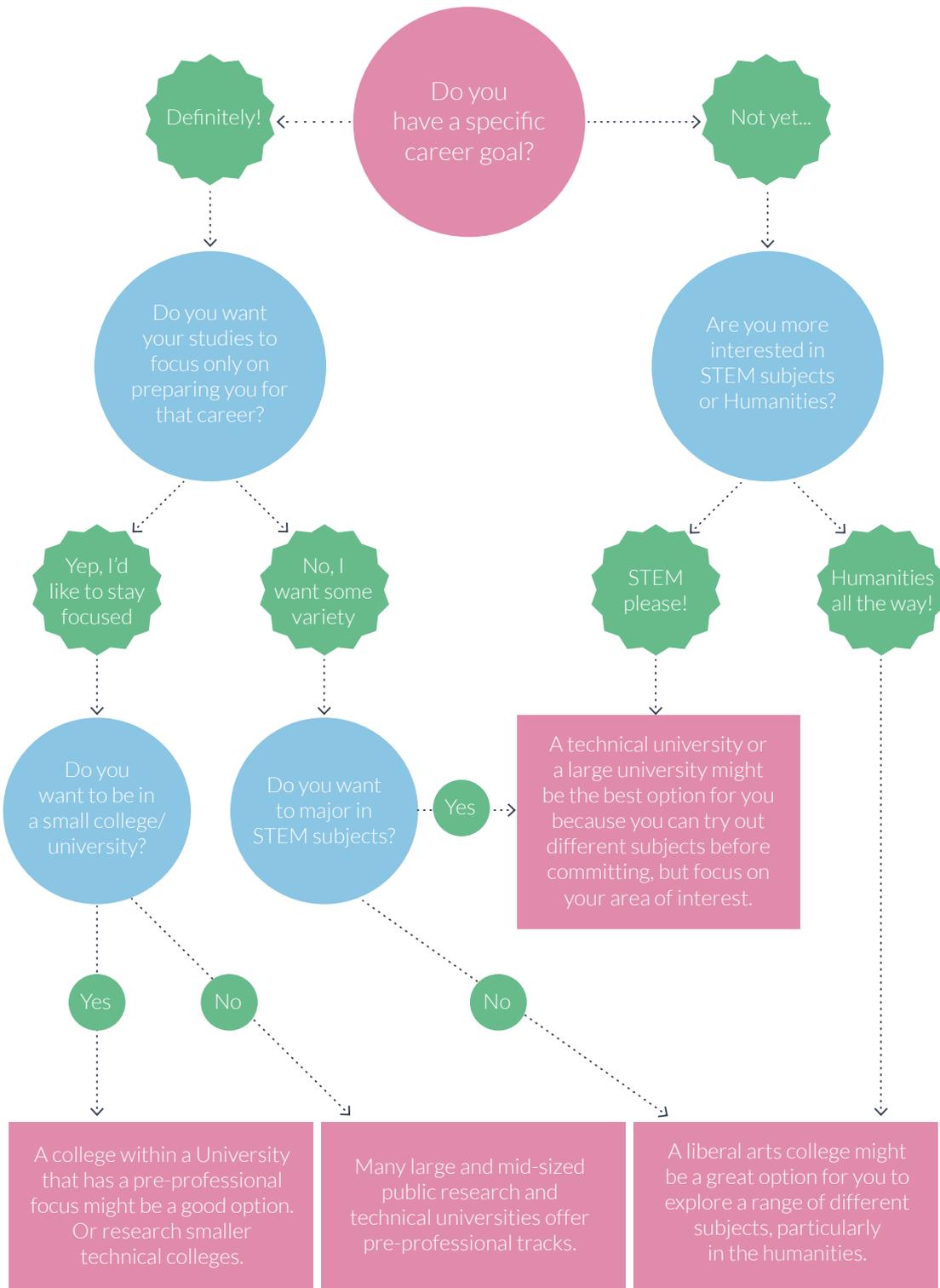
No. While many students choose complementary subjects that support each other (i.e. mathematics and physics), you're able to diversify and major in a completely different area from your minor if you wish!

4. Can I get a head start and skip any of the courses in year 1 of university?

Potentially! If you're taking AP, IB, or A-Level classes, this may exempt you from some classes by counting towards university credit. Also, some SAT Subject Tests are recognised as satisfying first year classes at some universities, so if that's important to you, it's worth looking into on a college-by-college basis.



Which university type is right for me?



Student life

On-campus living

Many students, particularly international ones, appreciate college dorm living because it pushes them to expand their social horizons, make friends with people they may not have interacted with otherwise and gain confidence through participating in different extra-curricular activities.

The 'dorm mate' structure offered at many universities means that you're randomly paired with someone to share your room. This person will be the same gender as you, but they may be from a completely different ethnic, cultural and social background from you, and they may be interested in very different things academically. Many students see this random allocation as extremely helpful for connecting people who would normally not find themselves thrown together, and creating friendships that challenge and help to grow their character.



College Sports

College sports are a *big deal* in the US. This goes beyond the college community — for the general public, college sports are followed with fans and are events that people attend or watch on TV. Many US colleges have sports stadiums, expert coaches and equipment for their athletes. College sport is popular partly because it's a key way for future professional athletes to get discovered, so as a sports fan you can see the 'origin story' of athletes that you then follow in their career.

For students, it can be a pathway to attend top tier institutions: on a sports scholarship.



Some fun facts about college sports:

- 400,000 student athletes participate in college sports every year; thousands receive scholarships to do so.
- 1 in 25 college athletes go 'pro'.
- The most popular college sport is basketball.
- The highest paid college sports coach is paid over \$11m/year.
- International students may have a better chance at sports scholarships for golf, soccer or rugby than traditional American sports such as Football or Basketball.

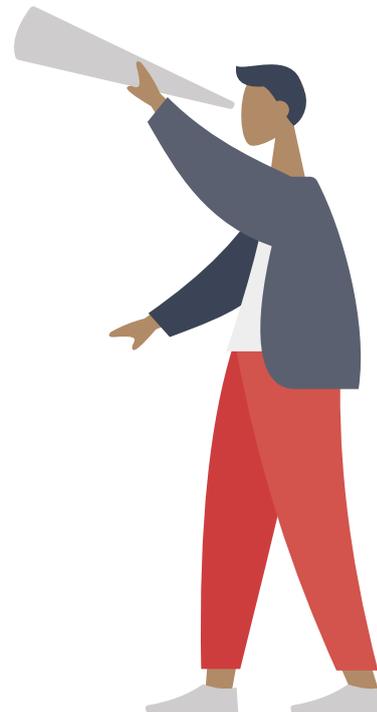
'Greek' Life (AKA Fraternities and Sororities)

These are called 'Greek' because they use Greek letters to identify themselves (e.g. Phi Beta Alpha or Kappa Kappa Pi). Each sorority or fraternity are different, but usually they share the following characteristics:

- Living together – there are large houses where members of these societies live together, generally with an older member acting as a guardian to ensure the safety (and rule-following!) of the members.
- No guarantee of entry – the selection of new members is on the basis of 'vetting' (typically based on social activities where the existing members get to know new members) and a probationary process where at the end of that period, the new member can be confirmed or ejected from the house.
- Secret symbols to denote belonging and exclusivity (e.g. hand signs, passwords, colors).
- Participation in social activities at university by volunteering philanthropically and hosting (often exclusive) parties.
- Create networking opportunities for their newly graduated members.

Famous Fraternity and Sorority members

- Michael Jordan
- Condoleezza Rice
- Ruth Bader Ginsberg
- Martin Luther King Jr.
- Harper Lee
- Steven Spielberg
- Brad Pitt



Extra-curricular activities, career-related clubs and interest groups

Apart from sports teams (which cater to different ability levels, not just professional!), US universities have a lot of opportunities to get involved in clubs and societies. Examples include Student government debate teams, Academic clubs (connected to your subject or goal career, student newspaper or radio, volunteer work, music and drama and much more.

International groups for students

Most US universities have official groups to bring together and support international students. Often there are more than one and they are divided by region (for example: Asia Pacific/South American/African etc.). They are designed to support and serve as a lobbying voice for the political, cultural and social interests of students of that heritage. There is a lot of effort put into helping students coming from minority backgrounds to foster relations with other groups on campus through community interaction, to raise awareness and provide an open space to learn about historical and contemporary issues facing people of their heritage.



Environment and setting

Physical Setting: Town/Suburban, City, Rural

The area you spend the next 4 years in is worth very careful consideration! Do you like nature walks and outdoor activities? Do you love discovering big sprawling cities? Do you like being able to escape into a quieter/country area but also having a city nearby? If you can't visit the campuses of the universities you're considering, then think about what you enjoy and do your research.

Residential options

There is a huge difference between a university where most people live on campus in dormitories, and a 'commuter' university, where most people travel to university each day from housing in a nearby city. Most universities provide substantial on-campus housing. However, some examples of commuter universities where the majority of freshmen commute rather than living on-campus include: University of New Orleans, University of New Mexico and Florida International University.

Living costs, travel costs and accessibility

If you are an international student, it's important to consider how easy and costly it is to get to an international airport to go home. Also consider how limited you will be if you can't drive/ need to take multiple forms of public transport to visit the nearest city with international/ family connections. Different cities and states have different average costs of living. Alongside your tuition, it's worth considering how much you will expect to pay on food and transport so you can figure out your budget.

Weather

The US is a very large country and has extremes of climate conditions. Some states, like Arizona, California, Hawaii, Florida, Georgia and Texas are generally hot all year round. States like Massachusetts and New York have four seasons and are typically quite temperate. Other states, like Vermont, Montana and Wyoming are much colder all year round.

Rank and reputation

Different universities have different ‘personalities’ and have local (and in some cases international) reputation for their social and academic environments. It’s worth trying to speak to people who have been at the university to check how accurate these reputations are if that is a reason you are choosing (or rejecting) a college.

Subject/Program reputation

Some universities are known for particular majors or departments. This can make it more competitive if you are going in ‘declared’ (meaning that you state the major you intend to study as part of your application).

Examples of universities with good reputations for particular programs:

- **Business**
University of Pennsylvania; University of Southern California; MIT; Georgetown.
- **Music**
The Curtis Institute of Music; The Julliard School; The New England Conservatory of Music; Indiana University Education: Vanderbilt University; Duke; Brown; Swarthmore College; Tufts.
- **English**
Harvard; Columbia; Stanford; Yale, Bowdoin College; University of Chicago.
- **Engineering**
MIT; Stanford; Princeton; Georgia Institute of Technology; California Institute of Technology; Rice; Purdue.

Social Reputation

Universities have different social reputations, sometimes for specific facilities, sports teams or general campus culture. This will be affected by other factors – for example a coastal institution will obviously offer a different social life to a quiet out of town campus.

Liberal to Conservative

This relates to political leaning of the majority of students, as well as faculty.

- Colleges with a liberal reputation include: University of Vermont and Oberlin College.
- Colleges with a more conservative reputation include: Brigham Young University and Texas A&M University.

Diverse to homogenous

This relates to the (amongst others) gender, ethnic and cultural diversity levels within the college student body and faculty. Colleges with more diversity include Pomona College, California College of the Arts, Lynn University, Swarthmore and Amherst College. Less diverse universities (i.e. mainly caucasian) include Clemson, Wake Forest, Ohio State and University of Alabama.

It may also be important for you to research other reputations, such as:

- Happiest colleges
- Most LGBTQ+ friendly
- Best college newspaper
- 'Party' colleges
- Accessibility
- Reputation of faculty (i.e. some faculty will be world renowned experts/published authors in particular fields.)
- Religious affiliation of the college e.g. Brigham Young is Mormon-affiliated; Brandeis is Jewish-affiliated; Notre Dame is Catholic-affiliated. This doesn't mean they are exclusive to people of that faith, however.

International ranking and reputation

Some colleges with a local reputation for being brilliant are less well known outside of the US (Williams College, Wellesley, Middlebury and Harvey Mudd, for example). Other universities who fall lower on the rankings list have an 'international brand', like NYU and Boston University.



Your college visit checklist

Before you visit/kicking off your research

- Talk to alumni from your school who have attended the college you're thinking about applying to.
- Read blogs and discussion forums to get insight into what it's like to study at the college.
- Read about the college and be fully prepared with questions when you go to visit.

What to do when you're on the campus tour

- Sit in on a class to get a feel for the type of teaching and the learning environment.
- Talk to students and ask about their social and academic experience of the college. Probe areas you're interested in, such as extra-curriculars, support services or learning environment.
- Talk to faculty members and ask them about what type of students thrive at the college – you'll get an interesting perspective from them. If you know your subject area of interest, try to speak to a faculty member from that department.
- Walk around and 'use' the campus – go and sit on the lawn, go eat in the cafeteria and see if you can visit the dormitories. Try to imagine yourself living there!
- Go to see facilities that are important to you – it might be a laboratory, sports facility, art studio etc.
- If there is a town/city nearby, go exploring! Make sure you can imagine yourself living not just on campus, but in the area.

Example questions to ask current students:

- How would you describe this college in 3 words? What makes it different from other colleges that are nearby/similar on the surface?
- Why did you choose this college? Has it lived up to it?
- What do you do for fun/on the weekends?
- What is the international student community like?
- How easy is it to travel to and from the campus?
- What is the social life like?
- What student support is there?
- What is the typical cost of living in this area?

Don't ask about anything you can look up. Use your precious campus tour time to get information you **can't** get on the website.

Examples of questions you don't need to ask during a tour are:

- Tuition fees
- Acceptance rate
- Number of students

Virtual tours

If you can't travel to the US to visit colleges before you apply, don't panic! There are lots of virtual campus tours that you can access online that give you lots of information about the facilities and feel.

How to apply

A maze to navigate!

Colleges have different priorities and criteria they use to assess candidates. This means there isn't one centralised application process for all, which might make it slightly complicated! One of the trickiest aspects of the process is that there are multiple application portals. Below is a guide to navigating them.

The Common App and the Coalition App

While some universities expect you to apply directly, many are part of semi-centralised portals which accept one set of information for multiple colleges: the Common App and the Coalition App. There are other minor application portals, but these are the ones you need to know about!

Through these online application systems, you complete forms specifying your personal details, academic information, extra-curriculars and any other information required (sometimes financial or visa information is needed). You will also upload a standard essay here which will be sent to all universities.

The Common App is the older, more established application portal and is accepted by around 800 universities. The Coalition App, on the other hand, is accepted by around 140 universities, although this is growing as it is a relatively new option. Its main difference from the Common App is its 'locker' tool which allows students to collate a more diverse academic and extra-curricular record of achievement. Many universities who accept the Coalition App also accept the Common App, so it's worth doing your research to try to reduce the number of different methods you use to apply.

Note:

Even if a university accepts an application via a portal, that doesn't mean they don't have special requirements. Some want supplemental essays to understand why you want to study with them, or why you want to study a particular subject. Others will want more documentation (e.g. portfolio, certificates, additional letters of recommendation).

Direct applying to us colleges and universities

Some colleges have their own application systems that they require you to use. Examples of this are the University of California (UC) group and University of Texas (UT). Their application systems are tailored to the information they want to know about you and you don't have the option of adding them to your Common App or Coalition App application.

The UC Application System

The University of California system caters to some of the most popular universities for international students to apply to, so we have focused on it here. UC includes:

- UC Berkeley
- UC Los Angeles (often called UCLA)
- UC Davis
- UC Santa Barbara
- UC Irvine
- UC Santa Cruz
- UC San Diego
- UC Riverside
- UC Merced

Requirements

- Academic history
- Four personal insight essays of 350 words each



Funding overview

US tuition fees are some of the highest in the world, but they vary dramatically based on the institution and financial aid available. Fees range from \$5,000 to \$70,000 per year excluding the cost of living, travel, books and other essential expenses as an international student.

In the US, different fee structures are given to 'in-state' and 'out-of-state' applicants. If you are an international student, you will be considered 'out-of-state'.

To give you an idea of what to expect from a public university, in 2017, the University of Michigan was charging out-of-state students just under \$45,500 per year, with about \$11,000 for accommodation and board, around \$1,000 for books and study supplies and \$2,500 for other personal expenses. This amounts to a budget of around \$60,000 per year.

That's more than most families can afford! However, US universities also have the highest instances of aid and financial support for students, so don't just take the price tag at face value. There may be ways you can dramatically decrease the cost, or even eliminate it altogether.

The different types of financial support to look into are:

- **Financial Aid**
Based on your circumstances and needs, as well as availability for international students, you may be eligible for financial aid from the universities you apply to.
- **Merit Scholarships**
If you're a whizz, some universities might want you so much they'll pay you to be there!
- **Sports/Athletic sponsorship**
This is a different application route and will be dependent on your skills in a sport that the university prioritises.

Financial assistance for international students

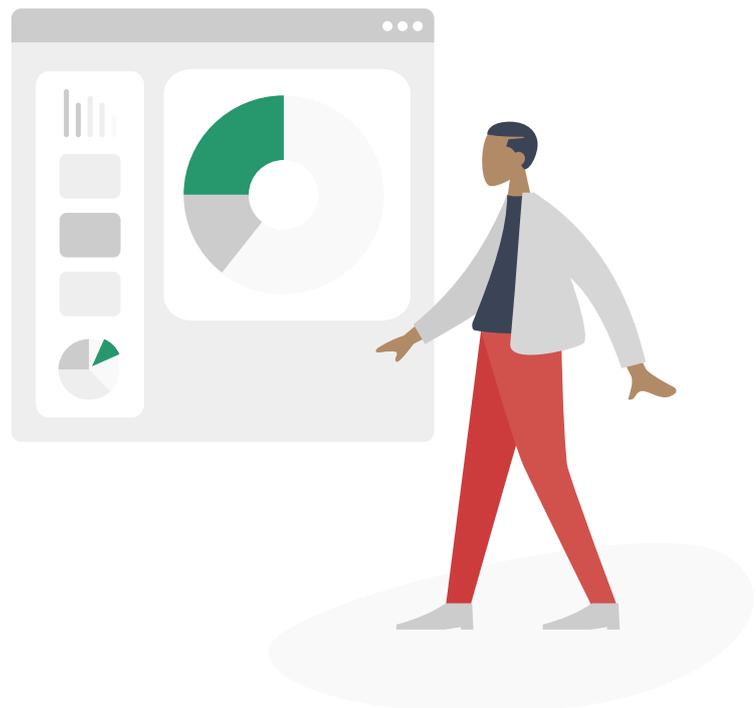
Universities have different budgets for international students, so it's worth doing your research on the ones that are known to have bursaries for international students.

Need-blind universities

Some universities in the states are 'need-blind' when they consider applications. This means that they do not look at your financial situation. For many of these universities, if you are admitted, you still need to figure out how to afford it. For some of those universities, they are both 'need-blind' and 'full-need-met' which means that they will provide for the financial assistance you require. This can be in the form of grants, or with work-study programs where you earn your keep. There are only a handful of need-blind and full-need-met universities (Harvard, Princeton, Yale, MIT and Amherst).

Need-aware universities

Most universities are 'need-aware' which means that alongside the rest of your application, they will consider your financial need. If you have a lot of financial need, this may harm your application unless you are an extremely desirable student. Financial aid is competitive, so you really need to stand out from the crowd to be offered financial support at need-aware universities. Some need-aware universities offer 'full-need-met' financial support, so if they make you an offer, they are aware of your need and they are prepared to make up the difference between what you can pay and what university will cost.





Don't forget you can use your BridgeU account to research UK universities and access more resources to help you with more decisions

app.bridge-u.com

If your school is based in China, please visit

app.bridge-u.com.cn

